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John Roberts
Furman University

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Crescent Revival



CHARLIE REGISTER

By John Roberts



Buoyed by the efforts of a coalition of community agencies, a once neglected area of Greenville today enjoys a renewed sense of hope.

Sitting in a sunbathed building once named in honor of a textile mill president, Viola Nelson sips coffee from a Styrofoam cup and reminisces about an era when the rhythms of the day were governed by the shrill blast of a mill whistle, and the deafening clacking of looms represented the sounds of prosperity.

People worked hard, and the community around the mill was teeming with life and activity. There were spirited baseball games against other mill teams. A nearby park was a popular weekend destination for concerts, dancing and carnival rides, or you could take the trolley into town for a picture show.

"All the families were so close," says Nelson, whose parents worked at Mills Mill in West Greenville. "If there was a death you almost had to close down a shift, because everyone wanted to pay their respects."

To be sure, life was not ideal. Many teen-agers dropped out of school early to take a mill job and help support their families. The workweek was grueling, and for many there were few opportunities outside of textile work.

Still, textiles were the heart of the Greenville economy for much of the 20th century, and the Textile Crescent, a region of the city shaped like a quarter-moon, was home to eight mills. This cluster of communities, which extended northwest from the Sans Souci area (approximately three miles from the current Furman campus) to West Greenville, was the city's thriving, lunch-bucket, blue-collar backbone.

During the latter part of the century, however, as the city's economy became more diversified, attention shifted to economic diversification and the development of downtown Greenville and the fast-growing suburbs on the east side of town. Many of the mills were shuttered and a way of life was lost.

Greenville, it seemed, had moved on, and the Textile Crescent had been left behind. People began leaving the area, and unemployment and despair infected the once proud communities. Although a recent influx of Hispanic immigrants helped pump new life into the area, their presence also magnified the Crescent's need for more healthcare and better education and childcare programs.

Help arrived in 1998, when the Northwest Crescent Child Development and Family Services Center opened. The center provides free healthcare, programs for senior citizens, and educational opportunities ranging from public kindergarten and adult education to English as a Second Language classes. Last year alone, the center served over 700 people, with many taking advantage of more than one of the center's programs.

But the Northwest Crescent Center is more than a story of a community facility that provides much-needed services. It is a story about changing lives and kindling hope in a forgotten community — and about a remarkable partnership that helped make everything possible.



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Last year, 255 people attended basic or intermediate English as a Second Language classes at the center.

Breaking the cycle

In 1981, Melinda Herman walked across the stage of her high school auditorium and received a diploma that she could not read.

As the teen-ager took the document and shook the principal's hand, a guidance counselor's harsh advice echoed in her mind.

"He told me that my only hope was to get a mill job and find a man to take care of me," Melinda recalls.

The young woman vowed then that she would never again darken a school hallway. For 12 frustrating years she had endured the taunts of fellow students and the frustrated

stares of teachers. Now, she no longer had to sit in the back of a classroom and pretend.

Melinda found a job at a J.P. Stevens textile mill at 18, was married at 22, and seemed to be on her way to fulfilling the guidance counselor's prophecy. Her husband, Russell, a high school dropout and textile worker, wanted to raise a family. But Melinda, who loved children, did not. The thought of not being able to read to them was unbearable.

At Russell's urging, she began taking reading lessons at the Greenville Literacy Association. When she was 31, the couple had their first child, Tasha. Ear infections stunted the toddler's speech development, and Tasha did not speak until she was 2.

By the time she was 4, the child was lagging behind children her age in language and communication skills. Her mother, who had never recovered after falling behind in first grade, feared her daughter would suffer a similar fate.

So she took Tasha to the Northwest Crescent Center just months after the facility opened. Soon, the child was enrolled in a speech therapy class and in the center's 4K program.

After dropping Tasha off at her classroom, Melinda began participating in the center's Parents as Teachers program, an informal discussion group composed primarily of young mothers. With a teacher on hand to facilitate interaction, the group would discuss their children's progress, what it takes to be a good parent, and the many frustrations a young parent endures. The pre-school program also included home visits by Tasha's teacher.

The support and assistance provided by the center helped Melinda realize the importance of being involved in her child's life — and the vital importance of reading to children at a young age.

"I needed someone to teach me how to read to my children," she says, "to teach me how to be a good parent."

Tasha, a lively, freckled-faced girl who loves to explore the creek near her home for frogs, turtles and tadpoles, is now an avid reader and an above-average student. She participates in the Accelerated Reader program at Armstrong Elementary, where she is a second-grader. And Melinda keeps close tabs on the progress of Tasha and her younger sister, 6-year-old Rachel.

"I volunteer at the school, read to them, and there is not a day that goes by during the school year where I do not talk to their teachers and check on how my children are doing," she says.

Her husband earned his General Educational Development (GED) high school equivalency diploma from the Northwest Crescent Center last summer.

The center, says Melinda, has changed their lives. And she's no longer scared of school.

"Going to the Northwest Crescent Center was the smartest thing I've ever done. I've broken the cycle," she says proudly as she strokes Tasha's hair. "My dreams are gone now, but I dream for my children. There is nothing that they cannot do."

Team effort

Susan Shi can't remember when her husband, Furman president David Shi, first gave her the letter from Elizabeth Locke, head of The Duke Endowment.

But Furman's first lady does recall her reaction: "I thought to myself, 'Wow. Furman has a great opportunity.'"

The letter, mailed in 1997 to Furman and other beneficiaries of the Endowment, introduced the Children and Families Program,

an initiative to help improve the lives of people living in economically depressed areas. It outlined grant opportunities for institutions willing to serve as a catalyst to develop a community-based plan that would address the healthcare and educational needs of low-income residents.

Shi, chair of the United Way of Greenville County's Success By 6 initiative, was acutely aware of the area's pressing needs in early childhood education. A 1996 study showed that 23 percent of the county's 6-year-olds did not have the skills needed to be successful first grade students. Many of these children did not know their colors, shapes or letters. Some had never held a crayon.

About the same time, two major studies on early childhood development captured national attention. The Perry High/Scope study revealed that every dollar invested in early childhood education would save \$6 in future social service expenses. In addition, groundbreaking research linked brain stimulation in infants and toddlers to future academic success.

In Greenville County, early childhood development centers in the Overbrook and Mauldin communities — both supported by the school district — had experienced remarkable success in raising school readiness scores, while test scores in the 11 elementary schools in the Textile Crescent were 10 percent lower than the county average.

Clearly, the children of the Textile Crescent needed help. Susan Shi felt the time was right. And she knew that The Duke Endowment could help provide the means.

"I grabbed Rudolph Gordon (then superintendent of the School District of Greenville County) and Hazel Harris (professor of education and director of graduate studies at

Furman) to see what we could collectively do with this invitation," says Shi.

Within weeks Shi had organized a grant-writing team made up of representatives from Furman, the school district, the Children's Hospital of the Greenville Hospital System, and the United Way's Success By 6 board. With guidance from the Endowment, the small group soon realized they could do more than establish an early childhood education center. They could address other pressing needs as well.

They knew that nearly one third of emergency room primary care visits at the Greenville Hospital System's Medical Center Clinic came from the Textile Crescent, which had no free clinic. In addition, many of the immigrants who had settled in the Crescent spoke little or no English, and a significant number of the working poor in the old mill neighborhoods did not have a high school diploma.

With Furman, the school district, Success By 6 and the Children's Hospital leading the way, the Northwest Crescent Child Development and Family Services Center began to take shape.

Leader of the band

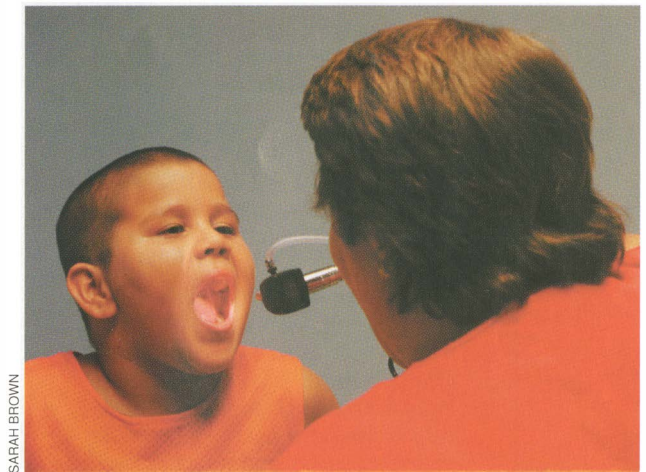
The first thing Ed Marshall noticed when he drove up to Arrington Elementary School was the 900-foot fence surrounding the property.

"That fence had to go," says Marshall, director of the Northwest Crescent Center. "We wanted to create an area that was welcoming to the community, so we took down the fence and planted maple trees."

The 36-year-old Marshall has been director of the center since it opened in early 1998 at the old Berea Elementary School. The following year the center was relocated to the renovated Richard Arrington Elementary School, a building named in honor



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SARAH BROWN



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The Northwest Crescent free medical clinic served 628 adults and 222 children and filled almost 1,100 prescriptions during the 2001-2002 school year. Bottom: Center director Ed Marshall shares a quiet moment with a visitor.

Northwest Crescent Center services

The Northwest Crescent Center brings together the resources of the School District of Greenville County's early childhood and adult education programs with community health, literacy and other agency services. The center's programs include:

4-Year Kindergarten (4K) — Half-day kindergarten classes (morning and afternoon sessions) for 4-year-olds, Monday through Thursday. Teachers conduct home visits and parent meetings.

Preschool Special Education — For children with developmental delays. The special education teacher also serves as a resource to the 4K and Head Start teachers. Itinerant services are provided for children with special needs who are enrolled in the regular 4K program.

Parents as Teachers — Families with children from birth to age 3 are provided parent education during monthly home visits, workshops, regular parent meetings and other educational family activities.

Family Learning/GED — Based on the national family literacy model funded through Even Start, the program provides a cluster of educational activities, including adult education for parents, early childhood education for children, parent education, and parent/child education.

English as a Second Language (ESL) — English language instruction is offered at the intermediate skill level.

Greenville Literacy Association/Smith Learning Center — Basic literacy and ESL classes are taught in conjunction with companion courses offered by the school district. This program features small classes and one-on-one tutoring.

Free Medical Clinic-Northwest Crescent Center Satellite — A primary medical care satellite clinic for adults and children. Pediatric services are provided in partnership with the Greenville Hospital System's Children's Hospital. Adult medical services, supported by a staff supervisor, are offered through volunteer physicians, nurses, screeners, translators and pharmacists.



Health Department — Services include nutrition counseling and food vouchers for women, infants and young children; well-child exams for newborns, infants and toddlers by a specially trained nursing staff; and immunizations for children and adults. Referrals are made to medical and other specialists, if necessary.

St. Francis Health System-Mobile Health Express — Provides free blood pressure, glucose and cholesterol screenings twice a month.

Head Start — Child development program for 3- and 4-year-olds that exposes them to a variety of learning experiences to foster intellectual, social and emotional growth. Other program components include health, nutrition, developmental screenings and social services.

Furman — Provides leadership in the implementation of the Northwest Crescent Center's Duke Endowment grant, while also providing pre-service and in-service training, student volunteers and practicum experiences for 4K teachers.

Seniors' Choice — Provides daily workshops, speakers, field trips and other activities for seniors.

Source: School District of Greenville County Web site

of the former president of Mills Mill who donated the land for the school.

Moving quickly through the center's hallways, peeking in classrooms, Marshall is a thin, youthful bundle of energy. A cross between Mr. Rogers and a politician on the campaign trail, Marshall has a smile and a kind word for every child and a handshake for the adults.

Before taking the job at the Northwest Crescent Center, he was director of Success By 6 in Greenville and had served as a lobbyist in Washington, D.C. Although his background is in education and public policy, he says he sometimes feels more like a bandleader.

"There are just so many programs here," he says. "There's so much going on."

The Northwest Crescent Center facility is provided and maintained by the School District of Greenville County. But each agency (or partner) operating in the building is responsible for its own budget and programs.

In addition to the school district's early childhood education and Parents as Teachers programs, the center houses a free medical clinic, a senior citizens program, and adult education and literacy classes.

Beginning when students arrive in the morning and continuing into the evening, when GED and English as a Second Language classes recess, the center is a hive of activity. Marshall spends much of his time giving tours and sharing with visitors the center's many successes, which include working to raise school readiness scores in the area's elementary schools and helping people earn their GED.

There are plenty of other stories — about adults learning to read, parents learning how to deal with their children, expectant moms receiving prenatal care, and lonely seniors making new friends.

Still, most of the questions Marshall fields are about funding and partnerships.

A sign at the center's entrance lists 11 partners, each of whom sponsors programs or provides funding or volunteers at the center. On the list are Furman, the Greenville County Health Department, Greenville Free Medical Clinic, Greenville Literacy Association, the Children's Hospital, the School District of Greenville County, SHARE, Head Start, the United Way of Greenville County, Seniors' Choice and St. Francis Health System.

"The most remarkable thing about this project has been the willingness of an array of agencies to come together to collaborate," says Susan Shi. "There has been almost no fighting over territory. Everyone's willing to share their resources for the common good."

Since serving as a catalyst to establish and organize the center, Furman has donated educational supplies and furniture, and Furman faculty and staff members serve on the Northwest Crescent Board of Directors.

In addition, Furman students are in many ways the lifeblood of the center's volunteer program. Last year, more than 200 students spent nearly 600 hours at the community center as volunteer teachers, translators, English teachers, landscapers and teacher aids, says Marshall.

"There is a stigma about colleges residing in a community but living in a cocoon," says Marshall. "The student volunteers here learn how the real world works. They come to understand the issues and problems that people outside their background face."

Elizabeth Locke, president of The Duke Endowment, which has provided \$1.3 million to the Northwest Crescent Center, says Furman's

involvement in the center is a formula that more colleges should emulate.

Student volunteerism is wonderful, she says. But colleges and universities must take a more active role in their communities.

"Generally speaking, town-gown relations at some colleges have not always been good," says Locke. "To people in town, the college looks very fat and rich. It looks like a business that won't help with bake sales or funding because of its non-profit status."

"Student volunteers are great. However, universities need to take their place at the table with the movers and shakers of the community."

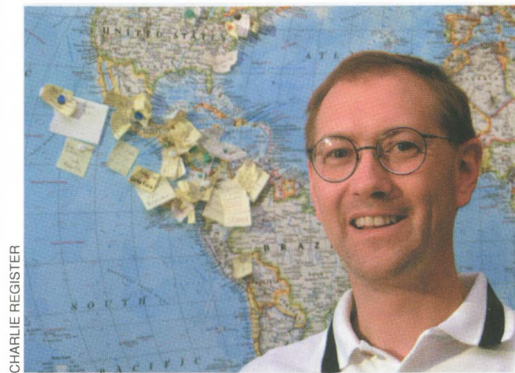
Through its commitment to the Northwest Crescent Center, Locke says, Furman is "doing this and many other things."

Says Susan Shi, who holds a Ph.D. in educational administration: "Furman's role in the center is an example of the university's commitment to play an active, leading role in helping to improve the community. This goes beyond volunteering. It's a deeper, more profound involvement."

Newfound optimism

Harold Batson, retired principal at Berea High School who has lived in the Textile Crescent since 1949, has witnessed the gradual decline of the area's once vibrant communities. Many of the students he taught and coached during a 50-year career as an educator and administrator have left for greener pastures.

But a sense of community pride, combined with a jump in residential and commercial development, is instilling residents of the Crescent with newfound optimism. The recently completed Cherrydale Point Shopping Center, located three miles from the



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The map behind Ed Marshall highlights the home countries of many of the Northwest Crescent Center's clients.

Furman campus at the site of the former Stone Manufacturing plant, is providing needed jobs and giving the area a strong financial boost — much as the Northwest Crescent Center is providing education, empowerment and hope.

"There is a real effort being made there," Batson says of the center. "They are trying to help people make a better life for themselves. When you do that, the entire community becomes stronger."

Viola Nelson, too, senses the change.

Finishing her coffee, she chats about the activities the Northwest Crescent Center provides for senior citizens — field trips, fellowship and a "rocking and reading" program for students in the pre-kindergarten program.

"This center has really helped because it reaches out to people," she says. "I was here when the mills closed down, and it was sad. Everyone moved away, and it was like a ghost town."

"But things are changing now. People are excited. I haven't seen that for a long time." 🍇